

A Tentative Guide
to the Themes of the
SURAHS of the QUR'AN

H. R. H. PRINCE

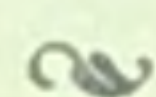
HAZI BIN MUHAMMAD

Contents

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:



‘Those who know cannot get enough
of it [the Qur’an] . . . despite constant
repetition, and its wonders never cease.’

(Tirmidhi)



Contents



ABOUT THE AUTHOR	10
PREFACE	11
1. THEORY	17
2. POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND USE	21
3. THE LIST OF THEMES OF THE SURAHS	25
4. ASSESSMENT AND DISCUSSION	33
(A) Questions and Doubts	33
(B) Proofs and Evidence	34
(C) Conclusion	36
5. THE <i>FADA'IL</i> OF THE <i>SURAHS</i> AND THEIR THEMES	37
6. DETAILS OF THE THEMES OF <i>SURAHS</i> 1-12	47
The general outline of <i>surah</i> 12	57
The theme of interpretation and understanding in <i>surah</i> 12	57
The theme of <i>ihsan</i> (excellence or virtue) in <i>surah</i> 12	59
7. FURTHER DETAILS ON THE SURAH OF YUSUF 	61
(A) The uniqueness of the surah of Yusuf 	61
(B) The allegory of the heart	62

About the Author



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Preface



The Holy Qur'an is an eternal guidance for the humankind for all times to come. Its miraculous style is different from normal books authored by human beings. The people of Arabia, whether believing in it, or not, fully surrendered to its eloquence, beauty and effective expressions that penetrate into the depths of one's heart.

When reciting the verses of the Holy Qur'an, a general reader feels that it is a combination of different points of guidance without an apparent sequence. Neither the Holy Qur'an itself, nor the Holy Prophet ﷺ has ever indicated that any of its surahs has a specific subject around which all of its verses revolve. That is why a considerable group of exegetes of the Holy Qur'an is of the view that its different verses, despite their eternal application, were revealed in the backdrop of different needs of a particular time. Being a book of guidance revealed gradually, it is like the different types of guidance given by a father to his beloved son, or by a kind teacher to his pupils, which are directed according to their needs at different times, and are not necessarily arranged in a logical sequence. Therefore, no logical sequence should necessarily be sought in all the verses of the Holy Qur'an, nor should a particular subject be allocated for each surah.

There is however another school of exegetes who believe that the verses of the Holy Qur'an are not without sequence. Based on this premise they try to explain the linkage between all the verses according to their own interpretation. The most outstanding work of this nature is that of Al-Biqā'i, in his '*Nazmuddurar fi Tanāsibil 'Ayati was-Surwar*' in 22 volumes.

This view finds support from the fact, admitted by all, that the order of revelation of verses is different from the order of their arrangement in their present form. Sayyiduna Uthman b. Affan ؓ the third Caliph of

the Holy Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said that whenever a group of verses was revealed to the Holy Prophet ﷺ, he called one of his scribes and said to him: 'Place these verses in that surah in which such and such is mentioned.'

This indicates that these verses had some kind of link with the surah in which were are ordered to be placed by the Holy Prophet ﷺ. Thus, it appears that the verses of the Holy Qur'an, as they are arranged by the Holy Prophet ﷺ in their present form have some link with each other, though very subtle, that cannot always be apprehended at first glance.

It is necessary to note that understanding the basic message of the verses of the Holy Qur'an never depends on understanding this type of fine linkage. However, the scholars who undergo a deep study of the miraculous style of the Holy Qur'an are in a way invited to find out this type of fine linkage, and the exegetes have made efforts to find it out on the basis of their *ijtihad*. This is a field of study open to new thoughts which may vary from person to person without in any manner affecting the evident meanings of the verses, or changing their import that does not depend on such an effort. All the attempts made by the scholars in discovering sequence of the verses of the Holy Qur'an and their mutual relationship should always be seen in this light.

Once, during an informal and friendly meeting with my honorable friend, H.R.H. Prince Ghazi b. Muhammad of Jordan, he expressed the idea that every surah of the Holy Qur'an seems to have some basic theme that is the centre point of all its verses, and that it would be advisable to compile these themes. Being an intricate subject, I found myself unable to undertake such an effort, but I felt that Allah *Subhanahu wa Ta'ala* might have inspired his heart to do the job, and therefore I encouraged him to do so.

Some months after this discussion, His Highness was kind enough to send to me a sample of the work he was doing, which by and large appealed to me, and along with some humble suggestions I requested him to proceed. The outcome of his effort is the thesis now at hand.

This thesis on the thematic sequence of the Holy Qur'an is truly a pioneering endeavor to gain insight into this intricate subject. I have had the privilege of paging through and benefitting from some parts of its manuscript, and have found that the sequence of verses in the light of the

proposed theme seems logical and beautifully described. With regard to the first twelve surahs of the Holy Qur'an, he has convincingly detailed how the basic theme of each surah is reflected in the sequence of its verses. About the rest of surahs he has just listed the theme, as he inferred from his study, inviting the reader to apply it to the verses of each surah on the pattern he has outlined in the first twelve surahs.

Another interesting study undertaken in this thesis is the relationship of his proposed themes to the *fada'il* (merits) of different surahs mentioned in the *Ahadith*. He has succinctly described how his proposed themes of the surahs are in accord with their merits reported from the Holy Prophet ﷺ in different traditions (some of them very authentic, and others though weak in their chain of narrators, yet tolerable at least in *fada'il*.) This particular feature of the thesis has shed light on a novel dimension of *Tadabburul Qur'an* (the contemplation of the Qur'an).

It is noteworthy though that since the basic themes of the surahs are not mentioned by the Holy Qur'an itself, nor are they referred to in the Sunnah, any endeavor to determine them, as pointed out earlier and admitted by the honourable author himself in his introduction, is a matter of *Ijtihad* which may vary from person to person. It is therefore possible that there be another opinion in discovering the Quranic themes. His Highness has also endeavored to answer possible contentions on the nature of this novel endeavor in his scholarly introduction. It is utmost precaution on his part that, instead of insisting on his discoveries, he named his endeavor as 'Tentative Guide'. I trust that the current pioneering work will, *in sha' Allah*, form a basis for further study in this intricate field. May Allah *ta'ala* grant this work His Approval and may He make it beneficial.

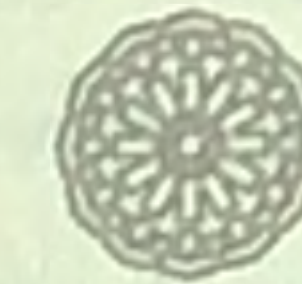
MUHAMMAD TAQI USMANI

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ
وَالصَّلَاةُ وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَى خَاتَمِ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ وَالْمُرْسَلِينَ

A Tentative Guide
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I

THEORY



There has been a lot written about the subjects of the Qur'an. Most famously perhaps, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (d. 505 AH/1111 CE) argued in his book *The Jewels of the Qur'an* that the Qur'an's 6,236 verses all deal with one (and some more than one) of only six basic subjects. These six subjects are: (1) God and His Attributes, Names, and Acts (including His creation); (2) spiritual wisdom and the path towards God (especially through remembrance of God); (3) descriptions of the afterlife and the next world; (4) stories of the pre-Islamic prophets, messengers and sages—as well as disbelievers and sinners; (5) arguments for belief and refutations of disbelief; and (6) laws, commandments, prohibitions and prescriptions for life. In fact it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a single verse in the Qur'an that does not go back to one of these subjects. The reason for this, Ghazali says, is that:

'The secret of the Qur'an . . . and its ultimate aim consist in calling people to God. . . . For this reason the surahs of the Qur'an and its verses are limited to six types'. (Ghazali, *The Jewels of the Qur'an*, 3)

In other words, the Qur'an is focused only on things that are useful to people—whether they understand them or not—in their religion, and also therefore in their spiritual, moral and social lives

Now most of the chapters ('surahs', in Arabic) of the Qur'an (with notable exceptions like *Surah 112* [*Surat Al-Ikhlās*] which deals with only God and His Attributes, Names and Acts) touch on more than one subject.

So it may be asked, do the individual *surahs* contain particular underlying themes that hold them—and the unitary combination of subjects they address—together?

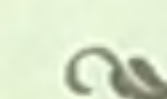
Over the centuries, a number of Qur'anic commentators (notably: Fakhr Al-Din Razi [d. 606 /1209] in his Commentary *Mafatih Al-Ghayb*; Burhan Al-Din Al-Biqā'i in his Commentary *Nazm al-Durar fi Tanasub al-Ayati wal-Surwar* [d. 855/1451], and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti [d. 911/1505] in his little book *Asrar Tartib al-Qur'an*; see also Ahmad al-'Alawi's [d. 1353/1934] mystical Commentary on the *surahs* on the *Fatihah*, *Al-Najm*, and *Al-Asr*) have shown the hidden connections between consecutive verses in *surahs*, and between consecutive *surahs* in the Qur'an. However, little has been written on the subject of the themes of the *surahs* of the Qur'an as such. Nevertheless, it does seem that each and every chapter of the Qur'an has a theme that runs through it. These 'underlying themes' seem to invisibly hold the individual verses of a *surah* together, somewhat like the string ('*nazhm*' in Arabic) of a pearl necklace holds the pearls together and makes them into a single necklace. The themes seem to relate to—and underlie—every single verse in that *surah*. They seem to help to explain not only what the *surah* is about in general but why one verse or passage follows the next. They seem to show a remarkable—indeed miraculous—and underlying unified content and coherence to every *surah* in the Qur'an.

This is actually implied in the very word '*surah*', which comes from the Arabic word '*sur*' meaning 'wall' and so shows the distinct and separate character of each *surah*. Moreover, there are studies showing (see, for example Bassam Sa'eh's *The Miraculous Language of the Qur'an*) the unique and distinct vocabulary and grammatical forms in the individual *surahs* of the Qur'an. It is also very significant to note that the *surah* is the smallest unit of the Qur'an that cannot be faked or forged, and that the Qur'an contains two Divine Challenges to people about attempting to fake a single *surah* of the Qur'an (see: 2: 23–24 and 10:37–38), and, indeed, this suggests that every *surah* is a unique and integrated 'entity'.

The themes seem to not only show the unified content and coherence of every *surah*, but of the Qur'an as a whole. For the most part they occur, as will be seen, remarkably, in complementary pairs next to each other in the order of the Qur'an itself (e.g. *surahs* 2 and 3; 47 and 48; 73 and 74;

113 and 114, and so on, well brought out in general by twentieth century CE scholars 'Abd Al-Hamid Farahi [d. 1930/1349] and Amin Islahi [d. 1418/1997], albeit in sometimes different pairings from the ones I suggest herein). The themes are not repeated in different *surahs* (at least not the main, 'primary' themes as such, for sometimes the 'primary theme' itself seems to suggest a 'secondary theme'), but rather, taken all together, they make up a complete and perfectly-interlocking map of Truth and reality, and indeed of humans as spiritual beings. This suggestion will become clearer after reading through the list of the themes.

It helps also to know the *ahadith* literature (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ), because both the individual themes of the *surahs* and the total picture portrayed by all themes taken together are issues discussed in the *ahadith*. This is too long a subject to delve into here, but it is enough just to take the famous *Hadith Jibril* (related in both Bukhari and Muslim)—and see how it is reflected in the first three *surahs*—to start to understand this.

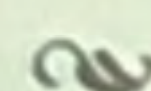


This is not to suggest of course that these themes in any way exhaust the meanings of the Qur'an. That is impossible—as the tens of thousands of quality commentaries (*tafsir*) produced by Muslims over the centuries show—and indeed God says in the Qur'an:

And if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea replenished with seven more seas, the Words of God would not be spent. Truly God is Mighty, Wise.
(*Lugman*, 31:27)

Nor is it to suggest that the themes proposed below are the only themes that could apply—in the way described here—to the *surahs* of the Qur'an. Whilst the list given herein is one that integrally shows all the human virtues and spiritual realities associated with the religion of Islam, others could also emerge. Indeed, it seems clear that an entirely different list of themes could be drawn up for each *surah* based on the Divine Names underlying each of the *surahs*, and, indeed, underlying the human virtues and spiritual realities described in the present list. After all, underlying human attributes and the qualities of the world are the Divine

Attributes and Qualities which give rise to them, sustain them and end them. Consequently, if the picture that emerges here is a 'pearl necklace' of themes of human spiritual life—to borrow another insight from Ghazali's *Kitab Jawahir Al-Qur'an*—there is at least one more 'necklace' to be found in the Qur'an. That 'necklace' is one made of priceless jewels of insights concerning the Divine Attributes and Names. And God know best.



POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND USE



It is obviously in no way necessary to be aware of themes to understand and appreciate the Qur'an. Otherwise, they would have been clearly stated in the Qur'an itself or in the *ahadith* qua themes. Also, 1400 years of Muslims scholars would have pointed them out. On the other hand, as cited above, the Prophet ﷺ said about the Qur'an: '*its wonders never cease*' (Tirmidhi). So it should be expected that these kinds of wonders will keep being discovered in the Qur'an. Also, what the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ did say about the special spiritual qualities and effects ('*fada'il*') of certain *surahs* of the Qur'an, does seem to confirm the themes of the *surahs*, as will shortly be discussed.

What then are the benefits of knowing about the themes of the *surahs*? It seems that they are beneficial in the following ways:

1. They clearly refute the Western and Orientalist recurring idea that the Qur'an is incoherent. For example, the Scottish philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle infamously wrote (in 1840), describing the Qur'an: 'I must say, it is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook. A wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement . . .'. Similarly, the following is a dialogue in Margaret Drabble's novel *A Natural Curiosity*, wherein one of the characters sets out to understand Islam and picks up a copy of a translation of the Qur'an:

'How can you understand the minds of people who don't respect

sequence?' he wanted to know. 'I'm sure there must be some kind of sequence,' said Liz vaguely. 'Why don't you read on, and see if one emerges?' Charles read on but not very far. He managed to find one or two pleasant passages about rich brocades and sherbet and fountains and young boys as fair as virgin pearls, but he found a great deal more about unbelievers and wrongdoers and the Hour of Doom and the curse of Allah and thunderbolts and pitch and scalding water and the Pit of Hell. 'Will they not ponder on the Koran? Are there locks upon their hearts?' Charles decided that there was a lock upon his heart: was it because he had been seduced by Satan, as the Koran suggested? Surely not.'

The subtlety and perfection of the themes of the *surahs* show—contrary to the superficial nonsense of the charge above—part of the inimitable miraculous perfection, beauty and genius of the Qur'an. They show them in the sequence not only of its verses, but of its entire structure.

2. They show the subtle distinct character of each *surah*, and hence why each *surah* is distinct. It also thereby shows why *surahs* seem to have their own unique vocabulary or verbal forms.

3. They show the perfect, holistic 'inter-lock' of how the *surahs* of the Qur'an fit together as a whole. In other words, they reveal something about the miraculous inner architecture of the Qur'an.

4. They show how the order of the *surahs* of the Qur'an is not random, and indeed seems to consist of a deliberate order of complementary pairs of *surahs*, with perhaps occasional 'stand-alone' *surahs* or groups of three or four.

5. They can perhaps aid in understanding the meanings of *surahs* of the Qur'an as such and indeed the Qur'an as a whole.

6. They perhaps explain why some verses—like for example 4:176, 5:3 and 17:41—that at first seem to interrupt the flow of a *surah* (and seem so out of place to non-Muslims) have been placed where they are.

For example, the following is verse 17:41 and the passage before and after it (*Surat Al-Isra*, 17:39–43):

This is [part] of the wisdom which your Lord has revealed to you. And do not set up with God any other god, or you will be cast into hell, blameworthy, abandoned.^[39] / Has your Lord then preferred you with sons and chosen for Himself females from among the angels? Truly you are speaking a monstrous

word!^[40] / And verily We have dispensed in this Qur'an, so that they may remember, but it only increases them in aversion.^[41] / Say: 'If there were with Him [other] gods, as they say, they would, in that case, have sought against the Lord of the Throne, some path.^[42] / Glory be to Him and exalted be He greatly above what they say!

Verses 39–40 and verses 42–43 seem to be refuting polytheism, but the subject of verse 41 is the Qur'an itself. However, the general theme of *Surat Al-Isra* is the Qur'an—as will later be seen—and the subject later returns to the Qur'an. So verse 41 is in fact not a 'thematic interruption' at all, but an 'anchor' to the whole passage.

7. It can help in memorizing each *surah*, particularly perhaps by shedding light on the sequence of the verses.

8. It can perhaps help to explain the theory that explains that certain *surahs* or groups of verses of the Qur'an are constructed as a 'chiasmus'. A 'chiasmus' is:

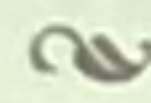
'A rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order' [in the same or a modified form]. (Oxford English Dictionary)

In other words, it is one where the second half is somehow the inverse mirror image of the first half, as if there were somehow a mirror exactly in the middle so that the end rejoins and reflects the beginning to make a 'ring composition' (when there is a central verse or group of verses that is not doubled—and around which the other parts mirror each other—this is called 'concentrism'). A number of contemporary scholars—both Muslims and non-Muslims—have shown this to be true with a number of *surahs* in the Qur'an, or groups of verses, although they often use these insights to draw unwarranted inferences or conclusions. For example, Michel Cuypers in his book *The Banquet* shows how this works in *Surat Al-Ma'idah*; Neil Robinson argues this about the first five verses revealed of the Qur'an (96:1–5) in his book *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*; and contemporary popular preacher Nouman Ali Khan has argued this about *Ayat al-Kursi* (2:255) and *Surat Yusuf* as a whole (See also: Dr. Mohamad Nabi Ahmadi, 'Semantic and Rhetorical Aspects of Chiasmus in the Holy Quran', Razi University, Iran, and Raymond

Farrin's book *Structure and Qur'anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam's Holy Text*—despite certain of this author's unorthodox conclusions). Cuypers—who is a member of the (Catholic) Congregation of the Little Brothers of Jesus—seems to argue that this is just a feature of Semitic literature (or perhaps of the Semitic mind), but it is difficult to understand how he could think it is humanly possible in a spontaneous oral text like the Qur'an. Howbeit, the idea of a single theme running through each *surah* (or passage) might well explain why and how it should be structured as a chiasmus.

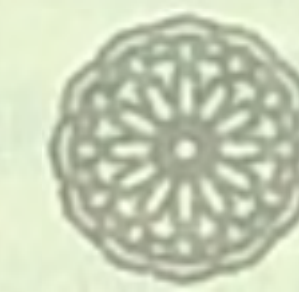
9. It shows a complete and timeless spiritual picture of human beings.

10. It seems to help explain the different particular *fada'il* of the *surahs* as related in the *ahadith* (as will be seen later).



3

THE LIST OF THEMES OF THE SURAHs



What follows are the suggested themes for each of the 114 *surahs* of the Qur'an. They are spaced according to their apparent groupings: in pairs or alone. Groups of three (e.g., *surah* 1 could thematically go with 2 and 3, and likewise *surah* 102 could go with either 100 and 101 or with 103 and 104) or four (e.g., 75–78; 79–82, and 83–86—arguably all this entire group of 12 could go together) are not mentioned, but they are fairly self-evident, especially in the last two *juzu's* of the Qur'an (i.e. from *surah* 67 on). Some of the *surahs* seem to have a 'primary' theme and a 'secondary' theme, and so the 'secondary theme' is suggested after the words 'hence also'.

Surah 1: *Al-Fatihah* (The Opening). Theme: Worship (*'ibadah*).

Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah* (The Cow). Theme: Faith or belief (*iman*).

Surah 3: *Aal 'Imran* (The Family of 'Imran). Theme: Submission to God (*Islam*).

Surah 4: *Al-Nisa'* (Women). Theme: Justice; fairness (*'adalah; qist*).

Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah* (The Table Spread). Theme: God's law and judgment (*hukm Ullah*), and hence also God-consciousness (*taqwa*).

Surah 6: *Al-An'am* (Cattle). Theme: Associating partners with God (*shirk*), and hence also what leads out of it: God's mercy (*rahmah*).

Surah 7: *Al-A'raf* (The Heights). Theme: Declaring the Unity of God (*tawhid*) and hence Closeness to God, sanctity (*wilayah*).

Surah 8: *Al-Anfal* (The Spoils of War). Theme: Combat (*qital*).

Surah 9: *Al-Tawbah* (Repentance). Theme: Hypocrisy (*nifaq*), and hence also Repentance (*tawbah*).

Surah 10: *Yunus* (Jonah). Theme: The Truth; Reality; the Real (*Al-Haqq*).

Surah 11: *Hud*. Theme: Rejection of the Truth and the fate of those who reject the Truth (*takdhib al-Haqq*).

Surah 12: *Yusuf* (Joseph). Theme: Understanding or interpretation (*ta'wil*) and excellence or virtue (*ihsan*). Allegory of the heart (*al-qalb*).

Surah 13: *Al-Ra'd* (Thunder). Theme: The innermost heart (*al-lubb*).

Surah 14: *Ibrahim* (Abraham). Theme: The inner heart (*fu'ad*).

Surah 15: *Al-Hijr*. Theme: God's protection (*hifth*).

Surah 16: *Al-Nahl* (The Bee). Theme: God's Command (*al-amr*) and His Creation (*al-khalq*).

Surah 17: *Al-Isra'* (The Night Journey). Theme: The Qur'an.

Surah 18: *Al-Kahf* (The Cave). Theme: Knowledge (*'ilm*).

Surah 19: *Maryam* (The Virgin Mary). Theme: The word (*kalima*).

Surah 20: *Ta Ha*. Theme: Remembrance (*dhikr*).

Surah 21: *Al-Anbiya'* (The Prophets). Theme: Heedlessness (*ghaflah*).

Surah 22: *Al-Hajj* (Pilgrimage). Theme: Guidance (*huda*), and hence also the Rites (*nusuk*).

Surah 23: *Al-Mu'minun* (The Believers). Theme: The believers.

Surah 24: *Al-Nur* (Light). Theme: Light (*nur*), and hence also clarity (*tabyin*).

Surah 25: *Al-Furqan* (Criterion). Theme: Discernment (*furqan*), and hence also—by implication—the mind (*'aql*).

Surah 26: *Al-Shu'ara'* (The Poets). Theme: There are many here, but lack of belief (*killat al-iman*) seems to be the most pervasive here (the *surah* starts and ends with it more clearly than the other themes. Other themes include: God-consciousness or piety (*taqwa*); oppression (*thulm*) and excellence or virtue (*ihsan*).

Surah 27: *Al-Naml* (The Ants). Theme: Certainty (*yaqin*).

Surah 28: *Al-Qasas* (The Story). Theme: Humility (*faqr*) and pride (*'ulu*).

Surah 29: *Al-Ankabut* (The Spider). Theme: Trials (*fitna*) and effort (*jihad*).

Surah 30: *Al-Rum* (The Byzantines). Theme: Contemplation (*tafakkur*).

Surah 31: *Lugman*. Theme: Wisdom (*hikmah*).

Surah 32: *Al-Sajdah* (The Prostration). Theme: The Spirit (*al-Ruh*).

Surah 33: *Al-Ahzab* (The Joint Forces). Theme: The Prophet ﷺ (*al-Nabi* ﷺ), and hence also the invoking of blessings upon the Prophet ﷺ (*salat 'ala al-nabi* ﷺ).

Surah 34: *Saba'*. Theme: Gratitude (*shukr*), and hence also praise (of God) (*hamd*).

Surah 35: *Fatir* (The Creator). Theme: Increase (*ziyadah*).

Surah 36: *Ya Sin*. Theme: Life (*hayat*), and hence also mercy (*rahmah*).

Surah 37: *Al-Saffat* (Ranged in Rows). Theme: Virtue or excellence (*ihsan*) and its reward (*jaza'*), and hence also oppression (*thulm*).

Surah 38: *Sad*. Theme: Mastery, perfecting (*itqan*), and hence also patience, steadfastness (*sabr*).

Surah 39: *Al-Zumar* (The Throngs). Theme: Sincerity (*ikhlas*).

Surah 40: *Ghafir* (The Forgiver). Theme: Supplication (*du'a*).

Surah 41: *Fussilat* ([Verses] Made Distinct). Theme: Uprightness (*istiqamah*).

Surah 42: *Al-Shura* (Consultation). Theme: Trust in God (*tawakkul*).

Surah 43: *Al-Zukhruf* (Gold Ornaments). Theme: The graces of God (*ni'mat Allah*).

Surah 44: *Al-Dukhan* (Smoke). Theme: Security (*aman*).

Surah 45: *Al-Jathiyah* (The Crouching). Theme: The Signs of God (*ayat Allah*).

Surah 46: *Al-Ahqaf* (The Sand Dunes). Theme: Transmitted knowledge (*athar al-'ilm*).

Surah 47: *Muhammad*. Theme: Work (*'amal*).

Surah 48: *Al-Fath* (Triumph). Theme: Triumph (*fath*).

Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat* (The Private Rooms). Theme: Knowing each other (*ta'aruf*).

Surah 50: *Qaf*. Theme: Renewed creation (*khalq jadid*), and hence also knowing the world (through [v. 37] *giving ear to the truth attentively* [*'alqa al-sam' wa huwa shahid*]).

Surah 51: *Al-Dhariyat* (The Scattering Winds). Theme: *Fleeing to God* (*al-farr ila Allah*), and hence seeking God's forgiveness (*istighfar*).

Surah 52: *Al-Tur* (The Mount). Theme: God's punishment and reward (*'athab wa na'eem*).

Surah 53: *Al-Najm* (The Star). Theme: Revelation (*wahi*); Spiritual vision (*ru'ya*).

Surah 54: *Al-Qamar* (The Moon). Theme: Taking heed (*iddikar*).

Surah 55: *Al-Rahman* (The All-Merciful One). Theme: God's favours (*alaa Allah*), and hence also Beauty.

Surah 56: *Al-Waqi'ah* (The Event). Theme: Death (*mawt*).

Surah 57: *Al-Hadid* (Iron). Theme: The Life of this world (*hayat al-dunya*).

Surah 58: *Al-Mujadilah* (She That Disputes). Theme: Private Converse (*najwa*).

Surah 59: *Al-Hashr* (Exile). Theme: Forgetting God and oneself (*nasiy*).

Surah 60: *Al-Mumtahanah* (She That is to be Examined). Theme: Close Friendship (*wilayah*) for the sake of God.

Surah 61: *Al-Saff* (The Ranks). Theme: Being helpers for God (*ansar Allah*).

Surah 62: *Al-Jumu'a* (The Day of Congregation). Theme: Purifying the soul (*tazkiyyah*).

Surah 63: *Al-Munafiqun* (The Hypocrites). Theme: The seal on hearts (*tab'a 'ala al-qalb*).

Surah 64: *Al-Taghabun* (Mutual Neglect). Theme: Pettiness of soul (*shub al-nafs*).

Surah 65: *Al-Talaq* (Divorce). Theme: Godfearingness or piety (*taqwa*).

Surah 66: *Al-Tabrim* (Prohibition). Theme: Obedience, devotion to God only (*qunut*).

Surah 67: *Al-Mulk* (Control). Theme: God's sovereignty, control (*al-mulk*), and hence also the body (*jism*).

Surah 68: *Al-Qalam* (The Pen). Theme: The Prophet Muhammad's character (*khulq*); contrasted with its opposite.

Surah 69: *Al-Haqqah* (The Reality). Theme: The realization of certainty (*haqq al-yaqin*); the meeting with Reality.

Surah 70: *Al-Ma'arij* (The Ways of Ascent). Theme: Prayer (as the 'ascent of the believer') (*al-salat mi'raj al-mu'min*).

Surah 71: *Nuh*. Theme: Asking forgiveness of God (*istighfar*).

Surah 72: *Al-Jinn*. Theme: The Jinn, and their worship.

Surah 73: *Al-Muzzammil* (The Enshrouded One). Theme: Night Worship (*'ibadat al-layl*).

Surah 74: *Al-Muddaththir* (The Cloaked One). Theme: Day Worship (*'ibadat al-nabar*).

Surah 75: *Al-Qiyamah* (The Resurrection). Theme: The Resurrection (*Yawm al-Qiyamah*); the Day of Judgment, and hence also the 'inner day' of judgment: the conscience (*al-nafs al-lawwamah*).

Surah 76: *Al-Insan* (Man). Theme: The Righteous (*al-abrar*), and hence also the path (*sabil*) to God.

Surah 77: *Al-Mursalat* (The Emissaries). Theme: The deniers of the Day of Truth (*al-mukadhibin*).

Surah 78: *Al-Naba'* (The Tidings). Theme: The Day of Truth (*yawm al-haqq*).

Surah 79: *Al-Nazi'at* (Those who Drag Forward). Theme: Heaven and Hell; passion (*hawwa*) vs. the 'wish' for purification (*'hal lak ila an tazaka'*).
Surah 80: *'Abasa* (He Frowned). Theme: The Blast (*al-sakhah*), and hence also fear of God (*khashyah*).

Surah 81: *Al-Takwir* (The Overthrowing). Theme: The arrangement of souls (*zawaj al-nafs*) in the hereafter.

Surah 82: *Al-Infitar* (The Cleaving). Theme: Helplessness (in the hereafter) (*'adam tamleek*).

Surah 83: *Al-Mutaffifin* (The Defrauders). Theme: Veil (*hijab*) and its removal.

Surah 84: *Al-Inshiqaq* (The Splitting). Theme: Each person's book (*kitab*) of deeds.

Surah 85: *Al-Buruj* (The Mansions of the Stars). Theme: The witness (of deeds) (*al-mashhud*).

Surah 86: *Al-Tariq* (The Morning Star). Theme: The registering (of deeds) (*al-hafith*), hence also the preservation of souls (*al-hafith*).

Surah 87: *Al-A'la* (The Most High). Theme: Glorifying God (*tasbih*).

Surah 88: *Al-Ghashiyah* (The Overwhelming). Theme: The return to God (*al-iyay ila Allah*).

Surah 89: *Al-Fajr* (The Dawn). Theme: The return to Heaven (*al-dukhl fil jannah*).

Surah 90: *Al-Balad* (The City). Theme: The two paths (*al-najdayn*).

Surah 91: *Al-Shams* (The Sun). Theme: The soul, as such (*al-nafs*).

Surah 92: *Al-Layl* (The Night). Theme: Striving, and the differences of intentions (*shatt al-sa'i*), and hence also giving (*'ata*).

Surah 93: *Al-Duha* (The Morning Hours). Theme: God's Grace (*ni'mah*), and hence also contentment (*rida*).

Surah 94: *Al-Sharh* (Solace). Theme: The breast (*sadr*) and hence also, difficulty and ease.

Surah 95: *Al-Tin* (The Fig). Theme: Human stature (*takwin*).

Surah 96: *Al-Alaq* (The Clot). Theme: The recitation of the Qur'an (*qira'a*).

Surah 97: *Al-Qadr* (Power). Theme: The revelation of the Qur'an (*tanzil*).

Surah 98: *Al-Bayyinah* (The Clear Proof). Theme: The clear proof in this world (*al-bayyinah*).

Surah 99: *Al-Zalzalah* (The Earthquake). Theme: Seeing one's acts in the next world (*ru'yat al-amal*).

Surah 100: *Al-Adiyat* (The Coursers). Theme: The balance of intentions, and hence also ingratitude (*kunud*).

Surah 101: *Al-Qari'ah* (The Calamity). Theme: The balance of deeds, hence also a pleasant existence (*'isha radiyah*).

Surah 102: *Al-Takathur* (Striving for More). Theme: The 'eye of certainty' (*'ayn al-yaqin*), and hence also distraction (*ilha'*).

Surah 103: *Al-Asr* (The Declining Day). Theme: The ravage of time (*al-khusr*)—and how to be safe from it.

Surah 74: *Al-Muddaththir* (The Cloaked One). Theme: Day Worship (*'ibadat al-nahar*).

Surah 75: *Al-Qiyamah* (The Resurrection). Theme: The Resurrection (*Yawm al-Qiyamah*); the Day of Judgment, and hence also the 'inner day' of judgment: the conscience (*al-nafs al-lawwamah*).

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Surah 104: *Al-Humazah* (The Backbiter). Theme: Illusion of permanence (*hisab al-khuld*).

Surah 105: *Al-Fil* (The Elephant). Theme: God's protection of the Ka'abah (*amn al-Bayt*), and hence also destructive journey (*rihlah*).

Surah 106: *Quraysh*. Theme: God's protection of Quraysh (*amn Quraysh*), and hence also constructive journey (*rihlah*).

Surah 107: *Al-Ma'un* (Common Kindness). Theme: People's withholding (*mani*).

Surah 108: *Al-Kawthar* (Abundance). Theme: God's giving (*i'ta*).

Surah 109: *Al-Kafirun* (The Disbelievers). Theme: Religion (*din*).

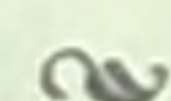
Surah 110: *Al-Nasr* (God's help). Theme: God's help (*nasr*).

Surah 111: *Al-Masad* (Palm Fire). Theme: Perishing (*tabat*).

Surah 112: *Al-Ikhlās* (The Unity). Theme: God's Unity (*Ikhlās*) and God's 'Eternalness' (*Samadiyyah*).

Surah 113: *Al-Falaq* (Daybreak). Theme: Seeking refuge from the evil in the world (*ist'atha bIllah min al-khalq*).

Surah 114: *Al-Nas* (People). Theme: Seeking refuge from the evil in the soul (*ist'atha bIllah min al-waswasah*).



ASSESSMENT AND DISCUSSION



(A) QUESTIONS AND DOUBTS

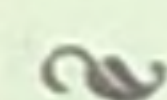
The following questions can reasonably be asked:

1. Is it possible that all of these 'themes' are not actually there in the *surahs*, and that they are contrived so that seeing them there is a superimposition created perhaps by an subconscious need—created by Western style education and reading habits—to read the Qur'an in the way that one might read Western literature, philosophy or fiction? After all, there have been many attempts during the twentieth century to find scientific facts in the Qur'an, and certain attempts to find 'miraculously numerological facts' in the Qur'an. These were all essentially products of contact with Western empirical sciences or computer sciences, and most—if not all—of them have all turned out to be wrong and wishful thinking by Muslims—either as science changes, or further study debunks the numerological theories. Could this not be the same sort of thing, albeit in a literary way?
2. Is it possible that they are present in some *surahs* and not others?
3. Is it possible that they are present only in parts of the *surahs*, or parts of some *surahs* and not others?
4. Is it possible that they are present in the *surahs*, but that the ones listed above are actually wrong?
5. Even though it is clearly stated that the themes proposed are not

exclusive, could proposing themes at all be ultimately unhelpful in that it might give the illusion of having plumbed the depths and mysteries of the themes of the *surahs*, which is beyond human capacity?

6. Is it permissible or advisable that anyone other than qualified Muslim scholars should read this theory?

7. If all of this is true, then why has it not come to light before now? Most importantly, why is it not clearly marked in the Qur'an and the *ahadith*?



(B) PROOFS AND EVIDENCE

In response to the questions above, the following proofs and evidence are offered:

1. The *surahs* themselves seem to announce their topics in a number of different ways. The first is through repetition. Sometimes these are through repetition of verses or rhetorical refrains (such as, most obviously, in *surahs* 45, 54, 55 and 77). Sometimes this is through frequent repetition of a word and its derivatives (such as 'iman' and 'mu'imin' in *Surat Al-Baqarah*, or 'amal' in *Surat Muhammad* ﷺ). Then, sometimes the themes are in the titles of the *surahs* themselves (such as in the *surahs* of *Al-Tawbah*; *Al-Mu'minun*; *Al-Nur*; *Al-Furqan*; *Al-Fath*; *Al-Jinn*; *Al-Bayyinah*; *Al-Nasr* and *Al-Ikhlās*). Most often, however—as one might expect—they are clear from the first few verses and the last few verses.

2. It seems to work beautifully: see the last sections of this treatise for how it works for every single verse of the first 12 *surahs* of the Qur'an (themselves comprising altogether some 42% of the Qur'anic text). The topics of passages of the Qur'an are clear and it would be hard to make them seem to relate to something extraneous.

3. It seems to fit in perfectly with the known *fada'il* ('special virtues' of the *surahs*) as discussed below.

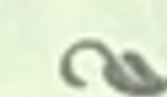
4. The pairings of the *surahs* seem to be generally very clear, and as will shortly be discussed, there at least two consecutive pairings (*surahs* 2 and 3, and 113 and 114) suggested in the *hadith* literature. Moreover, 'pairs' are a universal norm in manifestation (which inherently point to

the Unity beyond manifestation), as the Qur'an itself makes clear. God says (*Ya Sin*, 36:36):

Glory be to Him Who created all the pairs of what the earth produces, and of themselves, and of what they do not know.

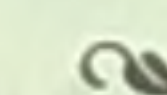
5. The picture of themes that emerges from all the *surahs* taken together seems to be one of a holistic interlock that mirrors the human soul and spirit, all the major elements of the spiritual life. This itself seems to stem from the idea of the Qur'an as a mirror of the human soul and spirit in all their possibilities, and so from God's words in the Qur'an:

Now We have sent down [as revelation] to you, a Book in which there is your remembrance. Will you not understand? (Al-Anbiya', 21:10)



As to the permissibility of the theory of the themes of the Qur'an, it ostensibly has—to the present author's knowledge at least—nothing in it contradicting doctrine ('*aqidah*'); sacred law (*shari'ah*); accepted commentary on the Qur'an (*tafsir*) or the Arabic language. Nor does it seek to restrict understanding of the *surahs* to particular themes, or assert the themes suggested are the only themes that exist in it—all of which would be prohibited.

Finally, as to the question of why it has not come to light until now, the first thing to be said is that the Qur'an is for all time, and as cited at the beginning of this treatise, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: '*its wonders never cease*' (Tirmidhi). The reason why it should come to light now is perhaps because people now—due to the mental reading habits created by Western-influenced modern education—automatically read texts looking for their 'thematic content', so perhaps it should not be surprising that it should emerge at this time. And God knows best.



(C) CONCLUSION

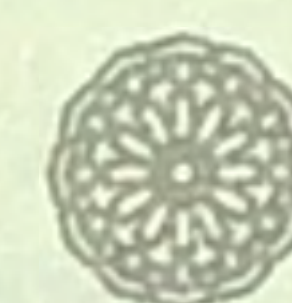
God knows best, but the present author is inclined to think that the evidence for the themes of the *surahs* is real and convincing—and withstands the questions mentioned above—and that the theory is a beneficial one for all educated Muslims (especially those educated in non-traditional education). Nevertheless, the theory must be further examined by Muslim jurists (*fugaha*) to see if they think it a worthwhile idea, and by Muslim scholars of *Tafsir* (Qur'anic Commentary) if they think it to be true. In short, it must be investigated more deeply by the community of qualified Muslim scholars as whole, before asserting with it complete certainty. For the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ warned:

Whoever speaks about the Qur'an according to his opinion or accord to that of which he [or she] has no knowledge, then let him assume his place in hell (Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, Ahmad).

Consequently, the present author claims no particular authority and makes no definitive claims and, but rather is only reporting what he has noticed, and suggesting a line of enquiry for the community of scholars to discuss and decide on. God knows best. That is why this little tract is qualified with the title: *A Tentative Guide to the Themes of the Surahs of the Qur'an*.



5

THE *FADA'IL* OF THE *SURAHS*
AND THEIR THEMES

There are many *ahadith* that contain allusions to the special virtues (*fada'il*) of different *surahs* of the Qur'an, and also of particular verses of the Qur'an. Sometimes nowadays, the 'strength' of some of these narrations is contested, even though there has traditionally been a consensus that a *hadith* encouraging a virtuous action does not have to be as strongly authenticated as one taken as evidence for a legal (*shari'ah*) ruling. The *fada'il* mentioned in what follows (these pertain to *surahs*: 1, 2, 3, 6, 11 and 'its sisters' [56, 77, 78, 81], 18, 22, 36, 44, 48, 55, 56, 67, 87, 99, 102, 103, 108, 109, 110, 112, 113 and 114) come from the generally-recognised books of the *ahadith*. For the most part the *ahadith* that pertain to individual verses are not mentioned herein, as the discussion here is about the themes of *surahs* as a whole, and how they fit in with the generally accepted *fada'il*. The *ahadith* that mention the Prophet ﷺ used to recite certain *surahs* at certain times or in certain prayers are also not mentioned here unless they specifically mention their distinct *fada'il*.

Surah 1: *Al-Fatihah* (The Opening). Theme: Worship (*'ibadah*).
The *fada'il* are many, and it is easy to see why. God says in the Qur'an:

And I did not create the jinn and mankind except that they may worship Me.
(*Al-Dhariyat*, 51:56).

The theme of the *Fatihah* is precisely worship. This corresponds exactly to the purpose of our creation. It perhaps helps to show why the *Fatihah* is necessarily recited (Bukhari and Muslim) in every single cycle of prayer (*rak'ah*) and in so many other contexts.

It perhaps also shows why it is 'the greatest chapter in the Qur'an... the seven often repeated verses and the Great Qur'an' (Bukhari); 'the best of the Qur'an' (Ibn Hibban uses the word '*afdal*'; Bayhaqi, *Shu'ab al-Iman* uses the word '*khayr*'); 'the mother of the Qur'an' (Tabarani, *Al-Awsat*); why it contains 'a cure for every ailment' (Bayhaqi, *Shu'ab al-Iman*); why it is read for the dead (Bayhaqi, *Shu'ab al-Iman*); and why it is one of the four treasures from under God's throne (Tabarani, *Al-Kabir*).

Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah* (The Cow). Theme: Faith or belief (*iman*), and:

Surah 3: *Aal 'Imran* (The Family of 'Imran). Theme: Submission to God (*Islam*).

Their *fada'il* are many and it is easy to see why. Their two themes are faith and submission, and these are the first two parts of 'your religion' according to the *Hadith* of *Jibril* (Bukhari and Muslim).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

'Recite the two bright ones the Surahs of Al-Baqarah and Aal 'Imran, for on the Day of Resurrection they will come as two clouds or two shades, or two flocks of birds in rows, pleading for those who recite them. Recite Surah al-Baqarah, for to take recourse to it is a blessing and to give it up is a cause of grief, and the magicians cannot confront it' (Muslim).

Similarly, the Prophet ﷺ said the devil leaves a house where *Surat Al-Baqarah* is read (Muslim) and it is the highest part ('*sanamah*') of the Qur'an (Hakim, Ibn Hibban and *Sunan 'Abd Al-Razzaq*).

Surah 6: *Al-An'am* (Cattle). Theme: Associating partners with God (*shirk*), and hence also what leads out of it: God's mercy (*rahmah*).

The Prophet ﷺ said: '

'When Surat Al-An'am was revealed... [there was] a host of angels covering both sides of the sky' (Hakim) and: '*Surat Al-An'am was revealed all at once accompanied by seventy thousand angels...*' (Tabarani, *Saghir*).

The theme of *Surat Al-An'am* is *shirk*—warning against it, of course. Its being revealed all at once (i.e., as a unity) seems to accord perfectly with this theme, even in its very form.

Surah 11: *Hud*. Theme: Rejection of the Truth and the fate of those who reject the Truth (*takdhib al-Haqq*).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

'Hud [no. 11], Al-Waqi'ah [no. 56], Al-Mursalat [no. 77], 'Amma yatasa'alun [Al-Naba, 78] and Idha al-shamsu kuwwirat [Al-Takwir, no. 81] have made my hair grey' (Tirmidhi).

The themes of these *surahs* are rejection of the Truth and the fate of the those who reject the Truth (11); death (56); the deniers of the day of Truth (77); the day of Truth (78) and the marriage of souls in the hereafter. These themes accord perfectly with why these *surahs* might turn the Prophet's noble hair grey—not of course for his blessed self ﷺ, but rather for his followers and community, and indeed all humankind.

This *hadith* itself also seems to prove that *surahs* have themes and can be thought of as being in groups.

Surah 18: *Al-Kahf* (The Cave). Theme: Knowledge (*'ilm*).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

'Whoever reads the surah of Al-Kahf on Friday, a light will be lit for him [or her] until the next Friday' (Hakim, *Mustadrak*).

The theme of the *surah* is knowledge. As light is of course the symbol of knowledge this theme seems to accord perfectly with this *hadith*.

Surah 22: *Al-Hajj* (Pilgrimage). Theme: Guidance (*huda*), and hence also the Rites (*nusuk*).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

'The surah of Al-Hajj has been honoured with two prostrations... whoever does not prostrate them, then let them not recite it' (Hakim, *Mustadrak*; Tabarani).

The theme of the *surah* is guidance and hence also the rites. This seems

to accord perfectly with why the *surah* should have two prostrations, as two prostrations are part of every cycle of prayer.

Surah 36: *Ya Sin*. Theme: Life (*hayat*), and hence also mercy (*rahmah*). Its *fada'il* are many. The Prophet ﷺ said:

'Whoever reads Surat Ya Sin at night becomes forgiven' (Abu Ya'la; Tafsir Ibn Kathir). And in another version: *'Whoever reads Surat Ya Sin at night seeking God's Countenance is forgiven'* (Ibn Hibban).

The Prophet ﷺ also said:

'Ya Sin is the heart of the Qur'an' (Darimi; Tirmidhi; Nasa'i; Ahmad).

He ﷺ also said:

'Read Ya Sin for your dead' (Ibn Hibban; Hakim, *Mustadrak*)

And he ﷺ said:

'Whoever recites Ya Sin in the morning, there will be ease for him till evening. And whoever recites Ya Sin at night then there will be ease for him till morning' (Darimi).

The theme of the *surah* is life, and this seems to accord perfectly with its being 'the heart of the Qur'an', since the heart is the locus of life. Its secondary theme is mercy and this accords perfectly with whoever reads it being forgiven, or being given ease.

Surah 44: *Al-Dukhan* (Smoke). Theme: Security (*aman*).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

'Whoever reads Ha Mim—the one where smoke is mentioned—on the eve of Friday becomes forgiven' (Abu Ya'la; Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

The theme of the *surah* is security, and to be truly secure requires precisely being forgiven by God and so this seems to accord perfectly with the *hadith*.

Surah 48: *Al-Fath* (Triumph). Theme: Triumph (*fath*).

Abu Barza Al-Aslami ؓ said: 'The Prophet ﷺ read [*Surat Al-Fath*] in the morning' (Abd Al-Razzaq).

The theme of the *surah* is triumph, and so reading it in the morning seems to accord perfectly with this, as it may lead to triumph during the rest of the day. And God knows best.

Surah 55: *Al-Rahman* (The All-Merciful One). Theme: God's favours (*alaa Allah*); hence also Beauty.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

'Everything has an adornment and the adornment of the Qur'an is Surat Al-Rahman' (Bayhaqi)

The theme of the *surah* is God's favours, and secondarily beauty. This seems to accord perfectly with it being the adornment of the Qur'an.

N.B.: Beauty is an indivisible quality, but is said to be composed of a harmonious balance of majestic and gentle or generous aspects. God says in *Surat Al-Rahman* (vv. 7–9):

And He has raised the heaven and set up the balance, / [declaring] that you should not contravene with regard to the balance. / And observe the weights with justice and do not skimp the balance.

And also (v. 60):

Is the reward of goodness anything but goodness?

And finally (v. 78):

Blessed be the Name of your Lord, He of Majesty and Munificence.

This explains why the 'secondary theme' is beauty, for beauty is a delicate balance of Majesty and Magnificence, and goodness is inner beauty.

Surah 56: *Al-Waqi'ah* (The Event). Theme: Death (*marwt*).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

'Whoever recites Al-Waqi'ah every night will never become afflicted with extreme need' (Bayhaqi).

The theme of *Surat Al-Waqi'ah* is death (and then the Resurrection) and this seems to accord perfectly with the *hadith*, because what one fears in extreme need or poverty is precisely death. Moreover, the most extreme need a person ever faces is as he or she is dying, so reciting *Al-Waqi'ah* every night, prepares one for death, and so saves one from the fear of extreme need, and God knows best.

N.B.: The '*waqi'ah*' itself is said to be the universal 'shout' with which everything perishes, and after which the Resurrection takes place. Moreover, Anas bin Malik ؓ said: 'When a person dies his Day of Judgment arises' (Dailami).

Surah 67: *Al-Mulk* (Control). Theme: God's sovereignty, control (*al-mulk*), and hence also the body (*jism*).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

'I would that it were in the heart of every person of my community' (Tabarani, Al-Kabir).

And:

'There is a surah in the Qur'an that has thirty verses that intercedes for whoever has it until [the person] is forgiven, and it is the surah of tabarak aladhi biyadihi al-mulk' (Nasai; Ahmad).

And in another narration:

'There is a surah in the Qur'an that is only thirty verses and pleads for whoever has it until [the person] enters heaven, and it is the surah of tabarak' (Tabarani, Al-Awsat)

And also:

'It is the Defender; it is the Protector which protects from the torment of the grave' (Tirmidhi).

The theme of the *surah* is God's control over the physical world including our own bodies. This seems to accord perfectly with it being the *Defender* and *Protector* from the torment of the grave, because the grave is when precisely people lose their bodies and fully realize that in fact they have no control at all, and so reciting the *surah* prepares them for that.

This may also explain then to someone why the *surah* intercedes for them until he (or she) is forgiven and enters Paradise. And God knows best.

N.B.: The theme of the *surah* as God's control over the physical world including our own bodies is very clear from the beginning of the *surah* (vv. 1-4):

Blessed is He in Whose hand is [all] sovereignty, and He has power over all things. / [He] Who created death and life, that He may try you [to see] which of you is best in conduct, and He is the Mighty, the Forgiving, / Who created seven heavens in layers. You do not see in the Compassionate One's creation any irregularity. Then cast your eyes again: Do you see any fissure? / Then cast your eyes yet again and your sight will return to you humbled and wearied.

It is also clear in the following verses (vv. 21-24):

Or who is it that will provide for you if He withholds His provision? Nay, but they persist in disdain and aversion. / Is he who walks cast down on his face more rightly guided, or he who walks upright on a straight path? / Say: 'It is He Who created you and endowed you with hearing and sight and hearts. Little do you thank!' / Say: 'It is He Who multiplied you on earth, and to Him you will be gathered'.

Finally it is clear from the last verse (v. 30):

Say: 'Have you considered: If your water were to sink deep into the earth, who then will bring you running water?'

Surah 87: *Al-A'la* (The Most High). Theme: Glorifying God (*tasbih*).

'Ali ؓ said that the Prophet ﷺ used to love this *surah* (Ahmad). The theme of the *surah* is glorifying God and this seems to accord perfectly with the Prophet's ﷺ loving it in particular, as no doubt he ﷺ used to love glorifying God. And God knows best.

Surah 99: *Al-Zalzalah* (The Earthquake). Theme: Seeing one's acts in the next world (*ru'yat al-amal*), and:

Surah 109: *Al-Kafirun* (The Disbelievers). Theme: Religion (*din*), and:

Surah 110: *Al-Nasr* (God's help). Theme: God's help (*nasr*), and:

Surah 112: *Al-Ikhlās* (Sincerity to God). Theme: God's Unity (*Ahadiyyah*) and God's being 'Besought by all and needing none' (*Samadiyyah*).

Abdullah Ibn 'Abbas ؓ reported that the Prophet ﷺ said that *Surat al-Zalzalah* is the equivalent of half of the Qur'an; that *Surat Al-Ikhlās* is the equivalent of a third of the Qur'an, and that *Surat Al-Kafirun* is the equivalent of a quarter of the Qur'an (Tirmidhi and Hakim, *Mustadrak*).

Anas Ibn Malik ؓ reported that the Prophet ﷺ said that *Surat Al-Ikhlās* is the equivalent of a third of the Qur'an; that *Surat Al-Nasr* is the equivalent of a quarter of the Qur'an; that *Surat Al-Kafirun* is the equivalent of a quarter of the Qur'an, and that *Surat al-Zalzalah* is the equivalent of a quarter of the Qur'an (Tirmidhi).

As regards the first narration, it will perhaps be noticed that the themes are: seeing the consequences of one's acts (*Surat al-Zalzalah*); God's Unity (*Surat Al-Ikhlās*), and religion (*Surat Al-Kafirun*), and that these together make up the equivalent of 'thirteen twelfths' of the Qur'an ($\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{4} = 6+4+3/12 = 13/12$). In other words, these principles comprise (slightly) more than the totality of the Qur'an. As regards the second narration, it will perhaps be noticed that the themes are: God's Unity (*Surat Al-Ikhlās*); God's help (*Surat Al-Nasr*); religion (*Surat Al-Kafirun*), and seeing the consequences of one's acts (*Surat al-Zalzalah*); and these together also make up the equivalent of 'thirteen twelfths' of the Qur'an ($\frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{4} = 4+3+3+3/12 = 13/12$). So the difference between the two seems to be that in the second narration, the value of the consequences of seeing one's acts is 'halved', and that 'other half' becomes God help (which had previously been only implicit). Howbeit, the themes here seem to be in perfect accordance with the narrations, in that they seem to be pointing out that the essence of the entire Qur'an is (knowing) God's Unity; religion; one's acts and God's help. And God knows best.

Surah 102: *Al-Takathur* (Striving for More). Theme: The 'eye of certainty' (*'ayn al-yaqin*).

The Prophet ﷺ said (to his Companions): 'Can one of you not recite a thousand verses daily?' Then they asked, 'Who could recite a thousand verses daily?' He replied, 'Can one of you not recite *Alhakum al-takathur*? (Hakim, *Mustadrak*)

The theme of this *surah* is the 'eye of certainty', and this seems to accord perfectly with the *hadith*, because seeing with the *eye of certainty* is a high spiritual state. Consequently, reciting the *surah* daily may prepare one for that state, and that state may be spiritually equivalent to someone who recites one thousand other verses of the Qur'an daily. And God knows best.

Surah 103: *Al-'Asr* (The Declining Day). Theme: The ravage of time (*al-khusr*)—and how to be safe from it.

Abi Madinah Al-Darimi said that the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ, whenever they met, would not depart until one of them had read [*Surat Al-'Asr*] to the other and given them greetings of peace. (Tabarani, *Al-Awsat*)

The theme of this *surah* is the ravage of time, and this seems to accord perfectly with the narration, because the Companions would have reminded each other of the days of the Prophet ﷺ, and would be taking stock of the ravage of time—and how to be safe from it. And God knows best.

Surah 108: *Al-Kawthar* (Abundance). Theme: God's giving (*i'ta*). The Prophet ﷺ said:

'Four were revealed from a treasure under [God's] throne: *Umm al-Kitab* [the *Fatihah*]; the verse of the Throne [2:255]; the last two verses of *Al-Baqarah* [2: 285-286] and *Al-Kawthar*' (Tabarani, *Al-Awsat*).

The theme of this *surah* is God's giving and this seems to accord perfectly with the *hadith*.

Surah 109: *Al-Kafirun* (The Disbelievers). Theme: Religion (*din*). The Prophet ﷺ said:

'Recite *Qul ya ayyuhal kafirun* for it is a declaration of freedom from polytheism' (Tirmidhi; Ahmad).

The theme of this *surah* is religion and this seems to accord perfectly with the *hadith*.

Surah 112: *Al-Ikhlās* (Sincerity to God). Theme: God's Unity (*Ahadiyyah*) and God's being 'Besought by all and needing none' (*Samadiyyah*).

The *fada'il* are many, including: (1) Paradise—for those who read it (Malik, *Muwatta*, Tirmidhi); (2) being freed from hell—for whoever reads it 100 times (Tabarani, *Al-Kabir*); (3) being called to enter Paradise from one's grave—for whoever reads it 50 times daily; (4) a house in Paradise—for whoever reads it ten times (Darimi); (5) being equivalent of a third of the Qur'an (Muslim); (6) containing God's Greatest name, that when supplicated with, is answered (Ahmad; Tirmidhi); and (7) whoever loves it having a high station (Tabarani, *Al-Kabir*, Bayhaqi, *Sunan*, Abu Ya'li).

The theme of this *surah* is God's Unity and this seems to accord perfectly with all these *ahadith*.

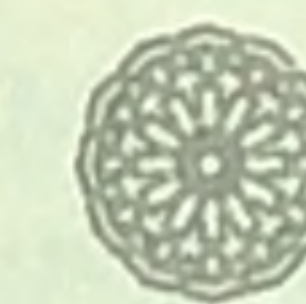
Surah 113: *Al-Falaq* (Daybreak). Theme: Seeking refuge from the evil in the world (*Al-ist'atha billah min al-khalq*), and:

Surah 114: *Al-Nas* (People). Theme: Seeking refuge from the evil in the soul (*Al-ist'atha billah min al-waswasah*).

There are a number of different *ahadith* about reading these two *surahs*—together with *Surat Al-Ikhlās*—for protection (especially morning and evening three times each, and before going to bed) (See: Bukhari; Muslim; Tirmidhi; Nasa'i; Ahmad; Ibn Hibban).

The themes of the two *surahs* are seeking refuge from the evil in the world and seeking refuge from the evil in the soul. These seem to accord perfectly with all the *ahadith*. And God knows best.

DETAILS OF THE THEMES OF SURAHs 1-12



What follows is an account of how the themes work specifically through every single verse of the first 12 *surahs*, which themselves comprise the longest *surahs* in the Quran and so around 42% of the total Qur'anic text.

Surah 1: *Al-Fatihah* (The Opening). Theme: Worship (*'ibadah*).

Verses 1-3: The Worshipped.

V. 4: Worship.

Vv. 5-7: The worshippers.

Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah* (The Cow). Theme: Faith or belief (*iman*).

Vv. 1-2: The Qur'an as a guide to faith.

Vv. 3-5: Those who have faith.

Vv. 6-7: Those who do not have faith.

Vv. 8-20: Those who pretend to have faith (the hypocrites).

Vv. 21-29: Worship with faith and its consequences.

Vv. 29-39: The story of Adam and his faith, and his lapse.

Vv. 40-74: The story of the Moses (*Musa*) and the Children of Israel and their faith and lapses.

Vv. 75-82; 94-105: The lack of faith of the Children of Israel at the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

- Vv. 83-93: The unbelief of the Children of Israel in the past.
 Vv. 106-123: Answers to doubts about the Qur'an.
 Vv. 124-141: The story of Abraham (*Ibrahim*) and his family and their faith.
 Vv. 142-150: Changing the direction of prayer (*qibla*) as a test of faith.
 Vv. 151-162: Trials as a test of faith.
 Vv. 163-164: The Object of faith.
 Vv. 165-172: The consequences of unbelief (having no faith).
 Vv. 173-203: Regulations as consequences of faith (vv. 183-187 pertain to fasting; vv. 190-194 pertain to combat; vv. 196-203 pertain to pilgrimage).
 Vv. 204-214: The behaviour of the disbelievers and that of the believers.
 Vv. 215-245: More regulations as consequences of faith (vv. 215-218 and v. 243-245 relate to combat again; vv. 221-237 relate to marriage and divorce).
 Vv. 246-252: The story of Saul (*Talut*) and David (*Dawud*) and their faith.
 V. 253: Faith of all the Prophets.
 Vv. 254-257: Faith in the last day and God and its consequences
 Vv. 258-259: The absurdity of lack of faith.
 V. 260: The faith of Abraham.
 Vv. 261-283: Charity as a means of strengthening faith, and then regulations pertaining to usury and incurring debts (as a consequence of faith).
 Vv. 284-285: The tenets of faith.
 V. 286: Prayer to overcome disbelief.

Surah 3: *Aal 'Imran* (The Family of 'Imran). Theme: Submission to God (*Islam*).

- V. 1-2; v. 6: God.
 Vv. 3-9: God's revelations, and the proper response to them.
 Vv. 10-13: Improper responses to revelation.
 V. 14: Cause of improper response.

- Vv. 15-18: Motives for proper response.
 Vv. 19-20: Islam as the summary of proper response to revelation; as *din*.
 Vv. 21-25: The opposite of Islam and its consequences.
 Vv. 26-27: God's power to which people must submit.
 Vv. 28-30: The proper behaviour of Muslims.
 Vv. 31-32: The proper behaviour of Muslims as following the Prophet Muhammad.
 Vv. 33-59: The story of *Aal 'Imran* as Muslims.
 Vv. 60-82: Challenge to people of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*) to be Muslims.
 Vv. 65-67: Abraham as a Muslim.
 V. 83: Everything in the world is (existentially) Muslim.
 V. 84: All prophets were Muslims.
 V. 85: Islam is the only religion acceptable to God.
 V. 86-91: Those who revert from Islam and their end.
 V. 92: True piety requires detachment.
 Vv. 93-99: More challenges to people of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*) to be Muslims.
 Vv. 100-110: Challenge to believers to die as Muslims.
 Vv. 111-120: The non-Muslims and their states.
 Vv. 121-129: The Muslims and their states during the Battles of Badr and Uhud.
 Vv. 130-132: Regulations on guidance and finance (for Muslims).
 Vv. 133-141: Guidance for Muslims.
 Vv. 142-150: Exhortation to patience (*sabr*) in Islam.
 Vv. 151-155; 166-168: The Battle of Uhud again and what happened to the Muslims and their enemies.
 Vv. 156; 176-178: The states of the hypocrites and the non-believers.
 Vv. 157-158; 166-175; 178-180; 185-186: Martyrdom and readiness for martyrdom among the Muslims.
 Vv. 159-165: The Prophet Muhammad's behaviour.
 Vv. 181-184; 187-188: The behaviour of the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*).
 Vv. 189-200: Exhortation to remembrance, contemplation and patience in Islam.

Surah 4: *Al-Nisa'* (Women). Theme: Justice; fairness ('*adalah*; *qist*).

- V. 1: Exhortation to God-consciousness (*taqwa*).
- Vv. 3-43: Regulations for justice (see v.3 for mention of fairness as motive) pertaining to orphans, women and inheritance.
- V. 40: God does not oppress.
- V. 44-57: The injustice of the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*) and exhortation to them.
- Vv. 58-59: The definition of justice as 'restoring trusts to their rightful owners' and exhortation to it.
- Vv. 60-63; 71-73: The injustice of the hypocrites of Medina.
- Vv. 64-70: The justice of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and its consequences.
- Vv. 74-76: The justice of combat against disbelievers.
- Vv. 77-81; 83-84: The injustice of those who were scared to fight.
- V. 82: The justice of the Qur'an.
- Vv. 85-86: Just behaviour.
- V. 87: God's justice.
- Vv. 88-89: The behaviour of injustice.
- Vv. 90-91: The injustice of hypocrites.
- V. 92: Justice towards enemies.
- V. 93: Justice for murder.
- V. 94: Justice in war.
- Vv. 95-96; vv. 100-104: Divine justice for those who fight for His cause.
- V. 97: Divine justice for those who have wronged themselves.
- Vv. 105-107: The Qur'an as justice.
- Vv. 108-121: Those who have been unjust to themselves.
- Vv. 122-126: Justice for all those who do good deeds.
- Vv. 127-130: Justice (*qist*) for women and orphans.
- Vv. 131-136: Injunction to have God-consciousness (*taqwa*) and to be just to everyone.
- Vv. 137-151: The injustice of hypocrites and disbelievers.
- V. 152; v. 162: The justice of believers.
- Vv. 153-161: The injustice of the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*).
- Vv. 163-166; vv. 174-176: Revelation as part of God's justice.

Vv. 167-170: Justice for disbelievers.

Vv. 171-173: An exhortation to justice.

Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah* (The Table Spread). Theme: God's law and judgment (*hukm Ullah*), and hence also God-consciousness (*taqwa*).

- Vv. 1-7: God's laws and judgment and obedience to them.
- Vv. 8-11: Being steadfast for God and witnesses to justice as the purpose of laws.
- Vv. 12-14; 17-18: God's laws to the Children of Israel.
- Vv. 15-16; 19: The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ clarifying laws and bringing guidance.
- Vv. 20-26: The disobedience of the Children of Israel at the time of Moses ﷺ.
- Vv. 27-31: Disobedience of Cain and his murder of Abel.
- Vv. 32-37: The murder of Abel as the cause of laws against murder, and the laws of combat (*jihad*).
- Vv. 38-40: Laws for punishing theft.
- Vv. 41-47: Those who reject God's laws and judgments.
- Vv. 48-50: God's laws and judgments in all revelations.
- Vv. 51-108: Staying faithful to God's laws.
- (NB: V. 91: The purpose of obeying God's laws as remembering Him and having patience.)
- (NB: V. 92: God-consciousness [*taqwa*].)
- Vv. 109-120: The Day of Judgment (when even prophets will be asked about what they did).

Surah 6: *Al-An'am* (Cattle). Theme: Associating partners with God (*shirk*), and hence also what leads out of it: God's mercy (*rahmah*).

- V. 1: God created everything and makes light and dark.
- Vv. 2-11: Disbelief despite God's having created everything and His Power.
- Vv. 12-13; 54: God's Essential Mercy.
- Vv. 14-32; 118-121: Exhortations and injunctions not to associate partners with God (*shirk*).
- Vv. 33-37: The trials of prophets when bringing their messages.

- V. 38: A verse showing the Qur'an's complete knowledge of things.
 Vv. 39-47: The futility of *shirk*.
 Vv. 48-58: The differences between those who associate partners with God (the *mushrikin*) and the true believers; the blind and those who can see.
 Vv. 59-67: God's knowledge and Power.
 (NB: V. 64: *Shirk*, despite God's Power.
 Vv. 68-70: The *mushrikin*.
 Vv. 71-73: The true believers.
 Vv. 74-83: Abraham's guidance to perfect non-*shirk*.
 Vv. 84-92: The guidance of the other prophets.
 (NB: V. 88: Contrast between guidance and *shirk*.)
 Vv. 93-94: Fate of the *mushrikin*, and their states.
 Vv. 95-99; 101-103: God's guidance and signs.
 V. 100: *Shirk*.
 Vv. 104-107: Spiritual insight, contrasted with *shirk*.
 Vv. 108-113; 123-124; 128-132; 136; 146; 148: Behaviour of the *mushrikin*, and their states.
 Vv. 114; 122: The behaviour of believers.
 Vv. 115; 125-127; 133-135; 149; 158-160; 165: God's decrees.
 Vv. 141-144: God's signs and guidance.
 Vv. 145-147; 151-157: Exhortations and injunctions.
 Vv. 161-164: The Prophet Muhammad's perfect non-*shirk*.

Surah 7: *Al-A'raf* (The Heights). Theme: Declaring the Unity of God (*tawhid*) and hence Closeness to God, sanctity (*wilayah*).

- Vv. 1-2: The Qur'an as a reminder
 V. 3: Injunction not to follow '*awliya*' (closest friends, masters) other than God.
 Vv. 4-10: Exhortations not to follow '*awliya*' (closest friends, masters) other than God.
 Vv. 11-25: The story of Adam and how he was deceived by Satan.
 Vv. 25-41: Warning to the descendants of Adam not to take Satan and his tribe as masters.
 Vv. 42-53: Believers and the consequences of belief in the next life contrasted with the fate of disbelievers.

- Vv. 54-58: God's power and the necessity of calling on God.
 Vv. 59-64: The story of the Prophet Nuh (Noah) and his warning to his people that they have no god but God (*Allah*).
 Vv. 65-72: The story of the Prophet Hud and his warning to his people that they have no god but God (*Allah*).
 Vv. 73-79: The story of the Prophet Salih and his warning to his people that they have no god but God (*Allah*).
 Vv. 80-84: The story of Prophet Lot (*Lot*) and his warning to his people to desist from their actions (which presumably were so bad that he had to first warn them to desist from these before he could tell them they have no god but God [*Allah*], as is implied in what he does elsewhere in the Qur'an [See: *Al-Shu'ara*, 26:163;166]).
 Vv. 85-93: The story of the Prophet Shu'ayb (Jethro) and his warning to his people that they have no god but God (*Allah*).
 Vv. 94-102: How similar warnings were delivered by all the Prophets to all communities.
 Vv. 105-126: The story of the Prophet Moses and Pharaoh and the magicians.
 Vv. 127-136: The story of the Prophet Moses and Pharaoh and the Children of Israel.
 Vv. 137-156; 159-162: The story of the Prophet Moses and the Children of Israel.
 (NB: V. 155: Moses and the righteous of his community taking God as master [*Wali*].)
 Vv. 157-158: Those who follow the Prophet Muhammad.
 Vv. 163-171: Stories of the Children of Israel and their trials in their worship.
 Vv. 172-174: The pre-temporal covenant between the spirits of human beings and God acknowledging God's Lordship.
 Vv. 175-178: The likeness of those who deny God's signs.
 V. 179: The blind in hell.
 Vv. 180-181: The Divine Names, and an injunction to call on them.
 Vv. 182-187: Those who deny God's signs.
 V. 188-195; 197-198: God's power, and yet people associate partners with God.

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 Vv. 114; 122: The behaviour of believers.
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 V. 179: The blind in hell.
 Vv. 180-181: The Divine Names, and an injunction to call on them.
 Vv. 182-187: Those who deny God's signs.
 V. 188-195; 197-198: God's power, and yet people associate partners with God.

- V. 196: The Master (*Wali*) of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is God.
 V. 199-206: Injunctions to remember and worship God.

Surah 8: *Al-Anfal* (The Spoils of War). Theme: Combat (*qital*).

- V. 1: The spoils of war.
 Vv. 2-4: The believers.
 Vv. 5-6; 9-14; 17-19; 42-44; 48-49: The Battle of Badr.
 Vv. 7-8; 38-9: That the purpose of combat is to affirm the truth.
 Vv. 15-16; 20-30: Instructions and exhortations to believers for battle.
 Vv. 31-37; 52-56: The disbelievers and their actions.
 Vv. 40-41; 46-47; 57-66; 72-75: The conduct of combat.
 Vv. 45: That combat is predicated on the remembrance of God.
 Vv. 50-51: The deaths of the disbelievers.
 Vv. 67-71: The prisoners of Badr.

Surah 9: *Al-Tawbah* (Repentance). Theme: Hypocrisy (*nifaa*) and hence also Repentance (*tawbah*).

- Vv. 1-10; 13-16; 28-29; 36-41; 71: Instructions to fight those who associate partners with God (*mushrikun*) and under what conditions.
 Vv. 11-12: The possibility of accepting the repentance of the *mushrikin* and under what conditions.
 Vv. 17-18: The building of mosques and its conditions.
 Vv. 19-22: Good deeds and their rewards.
 Vv. 23-24: Conditions for friendship with disbelievers.
 Vv. 25-27: The Battle of Hunayn.
 Vv. 30-35: The People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*) and their actions and the consequences of these.
 Vv. 42-59; 61-70; 74-87; 90; 93-98; 101; 125-127: The hypocrites and their actions.
 V. 60: The conditions for charity.
 Vv. 71-72; 88-89; 99-100; 111-112: The believers.
 Vv. 91-92: The sincere but incapable.
 Vv. 102-103; 105-106: The repentant hypocrites.

- Vv. 104: That God accepts repentance and has mercy.
 Vv. 107-110: The hypocrites and their false mosque.
 Vv. 113-114: The conditions for asking forgiveness for kin.
 Vv. 115-116: God's Guidance and Power.
 Vv. 117-118: God's accepting the repentance of the believers.
 Vv. 119-124: Injunctions to the believers.
 V. 128: The Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ mercy to the believers.
 V. 129: Relying on God.

Surah 10: *Yunus* (Jonah). Theme: The Truth; Reality; the Real (*Al-Haqq*).

- Vv. 1-6: The Truth of God's revelation, creation and promises.
 Vv. 7-8: The disbelievers and their final end.
 Vv. 9-10: The believers and their final end.
 Vv. 11-19; 21: God's postponement of people's end.
 Vv. 12; 22-23: God's answering people's prayers though they then ignore Him.
 V. 13: God's destruction of previous peoples.
 V. 14: God's testing people.
 Vv. 17; 20: The disbelievers and their actions.
 V. 24: The fleeting life of this world.
 V. 25: God calls to Heaven.
 Vv. 26-30; 45-56; 59-60; 62-64; 96-98: Those who do good things and how they will fare when they return to the Truth, and those who do evil things and how they will fare when they return to the Truth.
 Vv. 31-36; 61; 65-70: That God is the Truth, the Real and the Reality, and that other than Him is falsehood; and that He knows everything.
 Vv. 37-44; 57-58; 95-95; 108-109: That the Qur'an is the truth.
 Vv. 71-73: The story of Noah (*Nuh*) ﷺ and his reminding of the truth.
 V. 74: The other prophets bringing the truth.
 Vv. 75-93: Moses ﷺ and Aaron (*Haroun*) ﷺ bringing the truth.
 (NB. Vv. 80-81: Moses ﷺ brings the truth and shows the falsehood of magic.)

Vv. 99-103: Faith.

Vv. 104-107: Instructions to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

Surah 11: *Hud*. Theme: Rejection of the Truth and the fate of those who reject the Truth.

Vv. 1; 13-14; 17: That the Qur'an comes with God's Knowledge.

Vv. 2-4: Injunctions to worship God and warning of the consequences of not doing so.

Vv. 5, 18-22: The rejection of the disbelievers of its consequences.

V. 6: God provides for everything.

V. 7: World created as a trial.

Vv. 8-10: Reactions of disbelievers to God's graces.

V. 11: Reactions of believers to God's graces.

V. 12: Consolation to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ not to be too distressed about the fate of those who reject the Truth.

Vv. 15-16: Worldly life and those who desire it.

Vv. 23: The believers.

V. 24: Contrast between believers and disbelievers.

Vv. 25-49: The story of Noah ﷺ, how his people rejected him and were destroyed, and how those who followed him were saved.

Vv. 50-60: The story of Hud ﷺ, how his people rejected him and were destroyed, and how those who followed him were saved.

Vv. 61-68: The story of Saleh ﷺ, how his people rejected him and were destroyed, and how those who followed him were saved.

Vv. 69-76: The story of the Angels coming to Abraham ﷺ to give him good news of children, and to tell him of the destruction of Lot's ﷺ people.

Vv. 77-82: The destruction of Lot's ﷺ people and the saving of Lot's ﷺ family (except his wife).

Vv. 83-95: The story of Shu'ayb ﷺ, how his people rejected him and were destroyed, and how those who followed him were saved.

Vv. 96-99: The story of Moses ﷺ and Pharaoh, and of Pharaoh's destruction.

Vv. 100-102: That similar destructions befell other evil communities.

Vv. 103-109: That in the afterlife the good will be rewarded and the evil will be punished.

Vv. 110-111: That this will also happen to Moses' ﷺ community.

Vv. 112-115: Injunction to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and those with him to be upright and patience.

Vv. 116-117: If people had been righteous they would not have been destroyed.

Vv. 118-119: That God created people for differing, or for His Mercy (depending on the interpretation—but both are valid interpretations).

V. 120: That the stories will steady the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ inner heart (*fu'ad*).

Vv. 121-123: Warning to the disbelievers and encouragement to the believers.

Surah 12: *Yusuf* (Joseph). Theme: interpretation and understanding (*ta'wil*) and excellence or virtue (*ihsan*). Allegory of the heart (*al-qalb*).

The general outline of the surah:

Vv. 1-3: That the Qur'an is so that people can understand, and that this story (the story of Joseph ﷺ) is the best and most beautiful ('*ahsan*') of all stories.

Vv. 4-102: The story of Joseph ﷺ.

Vv. 103-107; 109-111: That most people do not understand, but that this story contains guidance and mercy to believers.

Vv. 108: That the path of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and those with him is one of insight (*basira*).

The theme of interpretation and understanding:

Vv. 4-6: Joseph's ﷺ vision, and his telling his father Jacob ﷺ about it: the interpretation is actually the story of the whole *surah*.

Vv. 13-14: Jacob ﷺ dreams (this is in the commentaries, albeit in apparently weak narrations) of Joseph ﷺ being attacked by

- wolves, and makes his other sons promise not to leave him if they take him out (in fact, the other sons themselves are the 'wolves').
- V. 15: Joseph ﷺ is cast into a well by his brothers but it is revealed to him that he will inform them of this without their being aware of it.
- Vv. 17-18: Jacob ﷺ does not believe his sons' story about the wolf and the false evidence of the shirt with blood on it.
- Vv. 21: God arranges for Joseph ﷺ to be bought by the 'Aziz' of Egypt, so that Joseph ﷺ may understand the interpretation of 'things' (events, stories, dreams, realities) (*ta'wil al-ahadeeth*).
- V. 28: The 'Aziz' deduces from the evidence of Joseph's ﷺ shirt being torn in the back that he was truthful, and Zulaykhah was lying.
- V. 33: Joseph ﷺ discerns that prison is more beloved to him than adultery, and prays that he ﷺ may go to jail in order not to be tempted or forced into fornication.
- V. 35: It becomes clear that Joseph ﷺ will be imprisoned for a period of time.
- Vv. 36-42: Joseph ﷺ correctly interprets his fellow prisoners' dreams.
- Vv. 43-49: The King's dream which no one around him can interpret properly, but which Joseph ﷺ interprets properly.
- Vv. 50-52: Joseph ﷺ refuses to come out of prison until the evidence against him is properly interpreted and understood.
- Vv. 58-59: Joseph's ﷺ brothers cannot recognise him but he recognises them.
- Vv. 62-65: Joseph ﷺ tries to teach his brothers to recognise themselves by secretly giving them their own merchandise back.
- V. 67: Jacob ﷺ correctly trusts his sons this time, but despite his understanding he ﷺ is unable to spare them a trial.
- V. 70: Joseph ﷺ teaches his full brother his real identity and warns him not to be deceived by their half-brothers' actions.
- V. 72: Joseph's ﷺ brothers do not realize they have the King's cup with them in their luggage.
- V. 76: God says: . . . *We raise by degrees whom We will; and above every man of knowledge is one who knows better.*
- V. 77: Joseph's ﷺ brothers mistake—or lie about—both Joseph's ﷺ and Benjamin's actions and motives.

- V. 83: Jacob ﷺ correctly does not believe his sons' story and correctly hopes that God may reunite them all.
- V. 86: Jacob ﷺ has knowledge from God.
- Vv. 89-90: Joseph ﷺ subtly teaches his brothers the wrong of what they did to him and Benjamin, as foretold in v. 15.
- V. 94: Jacob ﷺ correctly picks up Joseph's ﷺ scent.
- V. 96: Jacob's ﷺ knowledge from God proves to be correct.
- V. 100: Joseph's ﷺ vision (in vv. 4-6) is realised.
- V. 101: Joseph's ﷺ acknowledges God's gift of being able to understand and interpret things.
- V. 102: The Qur'an is news from the unseen.
- Vv. 103-7: Most people do not believe.
- V. 108: The way of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and those with him is one of insight (*baseerah*).
- V. 111: In this story is a lesson for people with cores (*uwli albab*), and this story could not be faked.

THE THEME OF *IHSAN* (EXCELLENCE OR VIRTUE)

The key point here is that in the Qur'an, understanding is not a mental faculty connected to the brain—as modern education assumes—but related to virtue and purity of heart. This is the essence of Islamic *epistemology* (the theory and method of knowledge). In other words, understanding depends on goodness, not on mental agility or training. Indeed, Joseph ﷺ, who symbolizes understanding, is associated primarily with *ihsan*, not with 'cleverness'. So Joseph ﷺ is called a *muhsin* (one who has 'ihsan') in: v. 22; v. 36; v. 56; v. 78, and v. 90.

Moreover, the very components—if not the actual definition of virtue—are given in this verse (v. 90; see also 16: 127-128, where they are also mentioned, but in two verses) as follows: . . . *Verily if one fears and endures, God does not waste the wage of those who are virtuous.* This is all the more remarkable since in the Qur'an there are eight categories of people who are loved by God and that those who endure (*al-sabirun*—3:146); those who fear (*al-muttaqun*—3:76; 9:4; 9:7), and the virtuous (*al-muhsinun*—2:195; 3:134; 3:148; 5:13; 5:93) are three of them. However, these three categories are the only ones (of the eight categories of ordinary believers whom God

loves particularly) that God is 'with' (*ma'*)—see: 2:153; 2:249; 8:46 and 8:66 for *those who endure*, and 2:194, 9:36 and 9:123 for *those who fear*) in a 'special' or particular way. Furthermore—and uniquely amongst all the categories of the virtuous—God is not only 'with' (*ma'*) but 'indeed with' (*'la ma'*) *the virtuous* (29:69). This is to say then that Qur'an subtly shows that 'the virtuous' (*al-muhsinun*) possess the sum of all the other virtues. This is no doubt the reason why the most accepted English translation of the word '*ibsan*' is 'virtue', and is explained in the famous *Hadith Jibril* (in Bukhari and Muslim) where *Ibsan* is defined by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as 'To worship God, as if you saw Him, because if you do not see Him, yet He sees you'.

Finally, the *surah* itself has '*ibsan*' as it is '*absan al-qasasi*', as mentioned earlier.

7

FURTHER DETAILS ON THE SURAH OF YUSUF



(A) THE UNIQUENESS OF THE SURAH OF YUSUF

The content of the *surah* of *Yusuf* is unique in the Qur'an for a number of reasons:

1. It is the only *surah* in the Qur'an that contains a complete, unified story of one personage from beginning to end: from childhood to death.
2. It is the only *surah* in the Qur'an that deals substantially with only one central personage (and their family and those they meet etc.).
3. The main character—Joseph ﷺ—is the only major personage in the Qur'an who occurs in only one *surah* in the whole Qur'an (he is mentioned by name in passing without details in only two other verses outside of this *surah* [*Al-An'am* 6:84 and *Ghafir* 40:34]).
4. God calls it (v.3) the '*most beautiful story*', and it is the only *surah* with that epithet.
5. It contains the only verse where God says that the Qur'an gives the *details of all things*, and is one of the two verses where God states positively that the Qur'an could not be faked (v. 111): *Verily there is in their stories a lesson for people with [real] understanding. It is not a fabricated discourse but a confirmation of what was [revealed] before it, and a detailing of everything, and a guidance, and a mercy for a folk who believe.*
6. It is the *surah* which contains this unique verse about knowledge

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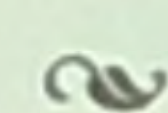
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(v. 76): . . . *We raise by degrees whom We will; and above every man of knowledge is one who knows better.*

Finally—but it is not unique in this—it is worth noting that it contains no verses explicitly commanding *shari'ah* rulings as such (although of course *shari'ah* principles can be derived from it).



(B) THE ALLEGORY OF THE HEART

As regards the story as an allegory of the heart, it is perhaps worthwhile mentioning it for a number of reasons, including the following:

1. There are, as just mentioned, no direct legal *shari'ah* rulings verses in the story.
2. God says the *surah* is *the most beautiful of stories* (*ahsan al-qasasi*) (v.3), and stories have many meanings and interpretations, and that is their whole purpose. Moreover, the 'most beautiful of stories' to human beings can only be in a way their own story, for that is what is most useful to them.
3. God Himself says (v.7): *Verily in Joseph and his brethren are signs for those who inquire*, and this invites a search for allegories, and God knows best.

So according to the 'Mystical Allusions' (*Ta'wilat*) of 'Abd al-Razzaq Al-Kashani (d. 730 AH/1329 CE), each of the personages in the *surah* and their acts—in addition of course to being literally true and historically factual—an allegory of what happens to the heart during the spiritual journey in human life. Needless to say, this 'allegory' in no way forms part of the accepted Commentaries (*Tafsir*) on the *Surah*, and is not something that all Muslims have to understand, even if it may make sense—and can be personally enriching—for some Muslims (so long of course it does not seek to contradict accepted doctrine, *shari'ah*, transmitted Qur'anic commentary, or the Arabic language). In another version of the *hadith* quoted at the onset (sometimes attributed to the learned Companion Ibn Mas'ud ؓ), the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: '*This Qur'an is God's Banquet (ma'idat Allah), so learn from God's Banquet what you can. . .*' (*Musnaf* Ibn Abi Shaybah).

The following is a sample of understanding Surat Yusuf as an allegory of the heart, with all its allusions:

'12:7: The similitude of Joseph ؑ is that of the heart which is prepared, of extreme beauty, dearly beloved to his father, Jacob [the intellect], envied by his brothers from another mother, namely, the five external senses and the five internal ones as well . . . [all being] the children of the soul, except for the memory, which is not envious of him and does not seek to harm him, leaving eleven [in total], matching their number.

12:8: '*Surely Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we are*': his brother [Benjamin] is the practical rational faculty from Joseph's mother the heart, Rachel [the self-reproaching soul] whom Jacob the heart married after the death of Leah the commanding soul.

12:20: The purchasing of Joseph ؑ by the *Aziz* of Egypt, in exchange for a very low price, a handful of dirhams, is their surrendering of him [the heart] over to the 'Aziz of the spirit'.

12:23: Zulaykhah's tempting Joseph ؑ away from his soul and her closing of the doors to him is an allusion to the manifestation of the [evil-commanding] soul in her.

12:51: As for the statement of the women of the faculties: 'God preserve us! We know of no evil in him', and the statement of the *Aziz's* wife: '*Now the truth is out*', [these constitute] an allusion to the illumination of the soul and of the faculties by the light of the Truth . . . As for the King's wish to use him for himself, that represents his making the heart as the vice-regent over the kingdom after complete perfection, as is related in the story [to the effect] that he [the King] made him sit on his throne, placed his own crown on his head, gave him his ring to wear and girded him with his sword as well as removed Potiphar from office.'

This allegory casts a new light on the following verses towards the end of the *surah* (vv. 103–108):

Yet, most people however eager you might be, will not believe. / Nor do you ask them any wage for it — it is but a reminder to all the worlds. / And how many a sign is there in the heavens and the earth which they pass by but disregard! / And most of them do not believe in God without ascribing partners [to Him]. / Do they deem themselves secure from the coming upon them of a pall of God's

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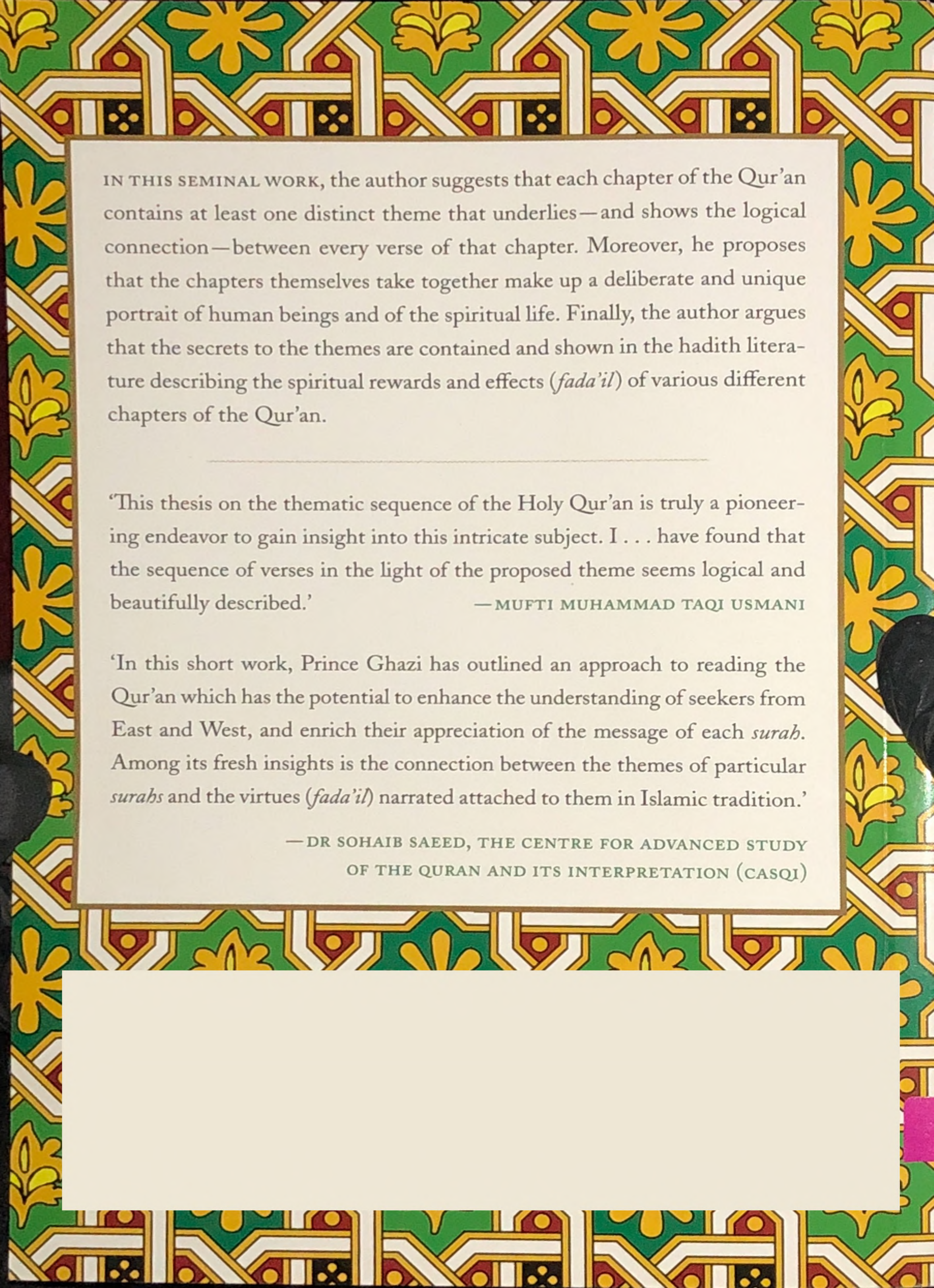
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And especially also the last verse (12:111):

Verily there is in their stories a lesson for people of pith. It is not a fabricated discourse but a confirmation of what was [revealed] before it, and a detailing of everything, and a guidance, and a mercy for a folk who believe.

∞





IN THIS SEMINAL WORK, the author suggests that each chapter of the Qur'an contains at least one distinct theme that underlies—and shows the logical connection—between every verse of that chapter. Moreover, he proposes that the chapters themselves take together make up a deliberate and unique portrait of human beings and of the spiritual life. Finally, the author argues that the secrets to the themes are contained and shown in the hadith literature describing the spiritual rewards and effects (*fada'il*) of various different chapters of the Qur'an.

'This thesis on the thematic sequence of the Holy Qur'an is truly a pioneering endeavor to gain insight into this intricate subject. I . . . have found that the sequence of verses in the light of the proposed theme seems logical and beautifully described.'

— MUFTI MUHAMMAD TAQI USMANI

'In this short work, Prince Ghazi has outlined an approach to reading the Qur'an which has the potential to enhance the understanding of seekers from East and West, and enrich their appreciation of the message of each *surah*. Among its fresh insights is the connection between the themes of particular *surahs* and the virtues (*fada'il*) narrated attached to them in Islamic tradition.'

— DR SOHAIB SAEED, THE CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDY
OF THE QURAN AND ITS INTERPRETATION (CASQI)